WHEN MRS. ABRAHAM LINCOLN REIGNED AT THE WHITE HOUSE.

A GLIMPSE OF THE LADIES WHO BRIGHTENED WASHINGTON SOCIETY IN THE WAR PERIOD AND QUAINT FASHION OF DRESS

MRS. McCLELLAN MOTHER OF THE PRESENT MAYOR OF NEW YORK

MRS. ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

KATE CHASE 1861

MRS. J.J. CRITTENDEN

GEN. JOHN H. MORGAN AND WIFE.

MRS. U.S. GRANT.

MRS. J.H. ALLEN.

LAURA KEENE, WHO WAS ONE OF THE CAST OF "OUR AMERICAN COUSIN" ON THE NIGHT OF PRES. LINCOLN'S ASSASSINATION.

WHEN Mrs. Abraham Lincoln went to Washington as mistress of the White House she was no stranger to the capital city. Perhaps had she been she would have shrunk more than she did from occupying that lofty place at a time when the war cloud hung black over the nation and only a few discerning eyes—her own husband's the clearest and most farseeing—could foretell when it would be scattered by the shaft of peace. But during Mr. Lincoln's single term of service in Congress Mrs. Lincoln had largely increased the portion of her social observation and no doubt extended the bounds of her ambition. From that taste of the delights, the excitement, the intrigue, even the extravagances and dangers of Washington existence her appetite had grown. Springfield was already too narrow for her and her dream was of a return to the capital clothed with power to repay magnanimously the favors of the few who had noticed with social recognition the wife of an obscure Representative. It is not certain that Mrs. Lincoln took the increase afforded by these ten years of absence from Washington to reflect upon her own inexperience, of which she had once been painfully conscious, but the testimony of her Illinois neighbors goes to show that she urged her husband to assume a graver dignity and that she grew less and less pleased when he stepped down from the pedestal of a statesman on occasion and took up the pulpit of repartee and anecdote.

But to a mind gifted with less perceptive power than Mrs. Lincoln's the social situation in Washington at the time of the campaign made by the republican party, with "Honest Old Abe" for standard bearer, could hardly have proved attractive. Putting aside the more serious aspect, a brilliant, even a great character, was required in the woman who should go in and attempt to rule over elements which were rapidly disintegrating.

A Clique of Aristocracy.

The Southern women had long controlled the society of Washington. With their natural and acquired graces, with their inherited taste and ability in social affairs, it was natural that the reins had fallen to them. They represented a clique of aristocracy; they were recognized leaders, who could afford to smile good naturedly at the awkward and perplexed attempts of the women from the North and West—"Mrs. Senator This," "Mrs. Congressman That"—to thread the ins and outs of Washington's social labyrinth.

Not all of these women were sympathizers in the cause of the South. Many who were found it expedient to conceal their sympathy, and to none of them was the thought pleasant of giving up whatever of social dominion she had acquired.

Into this million, composed of jealousies, animosities, positive rancors, went Mrs. Lincoln to set up her republican court. Her task was hardly less difficult than the vast and awe inspiring work of her husband, and considering what temperament she brought to its fulfillment it is no marvel that she did not wholly succeed.

There may come a time when an impartial collector of the small things of history will turn his attention to the years when Mrs. Lincoln reigned as mistress of the White House and in his definition of her troubles and difficulties will draw her memory of much of the note voce criticism with which it was then treated in the general mind. She was regarded as a woman of volatile tendencies, often unappreciated by those about her who did not know how good a wife and mother she had been.

Exaggerated Accusation.

She has been held up to scorn for her extravagances and blamed for having originated in Washington the love of dress. In all its counts the accusation has been easily exaggerated. On the least of them—dress, which is, however, the one that has weighed heaviest against her—it seems to be quite unfair. She certainly liked dress and chose in the manifestation of her taste durable magnificence, but judged by our modern standard her dress was remarkably simple. As the sale of her effects in New York the same opinion was expressed by society women.

Among the ladies of the Cabinet the President's wife found no one to assist her. They were mostly strangers to Washington with spirits bowed down by the impending woe of the nation. Their duties of reception giving and attending were performed timidly and nervously. No one of them appealed to her and to no one did Mrs. Lincoln reveal her perplexities. Later in Mrs. Feecenden the President's wife found a strong spirit on whom she could lean, but this was shortly before the terrible event which marked her life and too late for Mrs. Lincoln to take advantage of her friendship.

At the beginning, then, the President's wife surrounded herself with women whom she had heard praised for their brilliancy and seen courted for their beauty. Several of these were not even politically attached to the administration, and nearly all of them, if not Southerners, had strong Southern affiliations. Mrs. John J. Crittenden, a beautiful Kentucky girl, married to a man who had been Senator in 1817 and Attorney General in "Tippecanoe" Harrison's Cabinet; Miss Myra Clark, the daughter of a long ancestry of proud and wealthy slaveholders, the Lexington belle who afterward became the wife of General John Morgan; Mrs. George B. McClellan, Mrs. Mounset B. Field, of New York; Mrs. John E. Allen, who had a face made "for any part she was expected to play," and who afterward became an actress—these were a few of the women who "received" with the President's wife at her request, and their names, coupled with the above brief biographies, show that her choice was made from friendship or favor, and not policy.

Indeed, it was impolitic of her to ignore the women of the Cabinet and the Senators' wives thus boldly, and she was soon to be told so by a child of a girl who, though still almost a child, had the diplomatic instinct fully developed.

She was Kate Chase, daughter of Salmon P. Chase, Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury, whom he afterward appointed to be Chief Justice. To Mrs. Lincoln, shivering from the first intimation that her reign was likely to be a dismal wintry thing, devoid of gayety or any festive quality, this tactful girl came like a gust of warm, revivifying air.

There could hardly have been in Washington at that time two natures more dissimilar than Mary Lincoln and Kate Chase, and their union was bound to be short lived. But while it lasted Mrs. Lincoln tasted some of the fruit of popularity and power so grateful to her palate. When it dissolved her unpopularity grew apace.

Mrs. Lincoln's characteristics were quick excitability and restlessness; her manner was too animated, her laugh too frequent. Kate Chase spoke fluently and gracefully, but always with perfect calm. She was a born woman of the world with an air of sincerity which greatly added to her charm, and this charm was exercised on women as well as men.

None of the portraits of Miss Chase, beautiful as they were, ever did her complete justice. Her complexion was marvellously delicate, her fine features seeming to be cut out of beautifully tinted bisque. The eyes, bright, soft, sweet, were of an exquisite blue, and her hair a wonderful color like the ripe corn tossed in full sunlight. Her teeth were perfect, her figure was remarkably graceful and the poets of that day, and indeed of a much later day, sang the turn of her beautiful neck and the regal carriage of her head. The war time habiliments manage to hide much of this from us now.

From her teens this girl had been initiated into political questions, for which her calm and thoughtful nature well fitted her. She was ambitious for her father, and, when six months before the campaign of 1864 she realized that neither party would nominate him for President, she turned her energetic mind to the formation of plans and intrigues to obtain for him the nomination in 1868. His acceptance of the Chief Justiceship tendered by Lincoln was a bitter disappointment to her.

In politics Mrs. Lincoln's influence might have been injurious had her husband ever listened to her urgings. But he was not like man to yield his judgment, even though his wife was the person who urged it, and when Miss Chase understood, as she soon did, that however accessible to her inspirations Mrs. Lincoln might be, they went no further, the young woman tired of the burden of assisting Mrs. Lincoln in the White House functions which she had voluntarily assumed. Besides, the brilliant marriage, which turned out so unfortunate, was at this time being arranged.

To the wife of Stephen Douglas, the old rival of her husband, Mrs. Lincoln turned for a star of her court. It was for a brief season, for the "Little Giant" had almost reached his closing days. This mild and beautiful creature was accounted the belle of the White House receptions. To the republican women this gave offence, and since there were no longer "Douglas democrats," no favor was carried with the opposition. In this choice, as in every other, Mrs. Lincoln was moved only by her impulses. These began to sway her with the changefulness of fever. She made "dearest friends" and kept them for a week, when cards to even semi-public entertainments at the White House were no longer sent to them. The impression was not long in prevailing in Washington that Mrs. Lincoln was "erratic," when in reality she was simply puzzled. "Dearest friends" as soon became beggars of favors of all kinds.

It was at this period that Mrs. Lincoln's love of the theatre, always strong, rose to its greatest height, and she began to make the acquaintance of actresses who visited Washington and to honor them with invitations to the White House.

Truly, the women of the stage whom she affected were the best of their class and able to offer in return fresh ideas and broad interests. They were Miss Laura Keene, Mrs. John Hoey and Mrs. John Wood. With the two former she kept on terms of friendship for several years, their visits to Washington being occasional only, and thus the friction so opportunately to rise between the President's wife and the women who saw or could see every day was avoided.

Had it not been for this continuing friendship with Laura Keene, Mrs. Lincoln might not have insisted on her husband's accompanying her to see "Our American Cousin" on that April night. But who can say this positively? The Lincolns were in the hands of remorseless fate.

In those crinoline and basquine days, when street gowns were of rops and hail dresses—an expensive one worn by the President's wife cost $35—were preferably made of velvets of magenta and saffron, a hideous pale tint of the same color; in those days, when women wore congress gaiters in the house and for a reception put on coquettish red morocco slippers trimmed with black lace, there came to Washington a period of what Mrs. Lincoln called "court mourning." It was occasioned by the death of her son, and this private calamity proved an omen of the loss of many sons to many mothers. In the universal mourning the cessation of gayeties at the White House was to be eternal so far as Mrs. Lincoln was personally concerned. But before the dread calamities war and assassination had blighted the joy of the nation the life of Mrs. Lincoln in the White House had become utterly monotonous and wearisome.

Life and Sunshine.

At first all had seemed delightful; she had conquered, as she thought, haughty prejudices of the highest Washington society; the idiosyncrasies of her great husband she had buried in the background. In fact, she saw him the centre and idol of every social group he encountered—serene and buoyant of temper, charitable and tolerant of opinion, and, which she wondered, perhaps she came nearly to understand what a glow of confidence and good fellowship he diffused around him. Crowds rushed to see him, but they came to see her also, and unless she sought them out there were no thorns for her.

In this period of her domestic life she had no trials save those that fall to humanity generally, but little things exasperated her.

With her family, too, although an anxious and affectionate mother, she had not the little caressing ways that bring out the strong affection of children, and the Lincoln children naturally leaned more to their father, who spoiled them to excess, fed them candy, told them stories, overindulged them in a way which the mother was bound to counteract.

But the true reason of her irritability and unhappiness was her weariness. The "court" that she had fondly set up had turned out to be a mocking bubble, shining in iridescent colors only in her imagination; in fact, made up of sordid materials, and empty. It needed but a pin to prick it. Instead it was destroyed by means stronger than those that have overthrown a dynasty.

If during the life of the martyred President his wife received scant measure of approval and affection, the nation gave her after his assassination sympathy without measure and boundless pity—all which may lead the nation to think tenderly of her when they are paying him honor on February 12, the anniversary of birth.